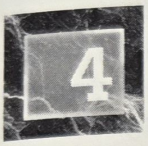

All these Numbers

Modern Western Bibles, and those derived from them, all have numbers scattered throughout the text. Sometimes these numbers appear in the passages themselves and sometimes down the margins of the page. These are chapter and verse markers. They are not a part of the biblical text! The purpose of the numbers is to aid readers in being able to find specific passages swiftly. They derive from early markings in manuscripts to mark off sentences, litugical readings, or scholarly notations.

What Are the Numbers?

There are always some people in Bible classes who do not understand the basic use of the numbering system. If one asks if there is anyone present who does not understand it there is always silence, but students will sit there either certain that they do know when they do not, or they have no idea but assume everyone else does and will laugh at them should they signify that they do not understand. Hence, it is best to just explain the numbers and not embarrass anyone.

If you happen to be reading a book on the Bible and you should run across the citation "Gen. 2:4b," you are being told that the author is speaking about the beginning of the Second Creation Story in Genesis. (If you don't understand the two creation narratives,

check with one of the introductions mentioned in the preface materials or chapter 9 below.) Taking the citation one part at a time we find the following.

"Gen." is the standard abbreviation for the the Book of Genesis. Most books of the Bible in any Western language have a standard abbreviation, though different printers may use variations (Exodus often occurs as either Ex. or Exod.). One simply has to become familiar with the various books of the Bible and then be able to associate them with the abbreviations that appear. If one comes from a Protestant background and is reading a Catholic book, one may find abbreviations for books unknown to the reader. Most are fairly obvious: "Macc." usually appears for Maccabees, "Bar." for Baruch, "Tob." for Tobit, and so forth. However, some can surprise you: Ecclesiasticus is usually shortened to "Sirach" from the Jewish designation of the book, "The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach." And occasionally the Latin book names still appear in their shortened forms: "Os." is Hosea (Osee), "Soph." is Zephaniah (Sophonias), "Par." is Chronicles (Paralipomenon), and so forth. On the other hand, Catholics may see "1 Kgs." in a Protestant volume and be unaware that the author did not mean First Samuel, which in traditional Catholic Bibles was called First Kings (the first of four Books of Kings).

The first number in a biblical citation is the "chapter" number. Most books of the Bible are divided into several chapters, which tend to be marked with darkened, bold, or enlarged letters in the text or margin. Some books are too short to have such divisions, such as Obadiah in the Tanak or Jude in the New Testament. From the example, "2" preceding the colon, means that the passage appears in the second major division of the book of Genesis. Many modern Bibles place the chapter numbers at the top of the page for easy reference, so finding chapter 2 in any book means only finding the correct book and maybe turning a page.

The number after the colon is the "verse" number. Verses are the divisions within chapters. They usually correspond to sentences or long clauses in prose texts and poetic verses in poetry; however, there is no necessary correlation between the numbering system and the grammatical divisions of the text, so they cannot be used to determine anything about the actual text itself. The verses can be any length from a couple of words to several sentences (particularly in some of the Eastern Orthodox books not found in the Western churches' Bibles). So the "4" of the example says that the passage in question is the fourth section marked off in the second chapter of Genesis.

There is in the example a "b" after the verse number. Modern biblical scholars, from the nineteenth century onward, have divided some verses into smaller sections in order to designate specific parts of a verse. The "b" in this verse is almost universally understood by scholars of the Tanak, since it divides verse four into the final line of the Priestly Creation Story and the first clause of the Yawhistic Creation Story. Poetry, as in the Psalms, often has been divided into numerous subdivisions by this small letter system. Individual lines of the poetic verse or even individual cola of the lines of poetry may be given their own subdivision lower-case letter. The problem with this system at the present time is that, with a few exceptions (like the current example), different scholars may divide the same verse with different subdivisions so it is not always clear exactly which part of the verse is meant (though at least "a" always means the first part of the verse).

The colon is used in most American publications to divide the chapter number from the verse number. Other countries use other conventions, which may be confusing until you get used to them, since periods and commas are commonly used to divide these numbers. Other punctuation may denote other relationships among the numbers in a citation; a semicolon usually denotes a break between independent citations, commas break up independent verses, and hyphens or dashes denote that the passage runs from one citation to the next inclusively. Try not to confuse the following:

2:4–6:7	=	chapter 2 verse 4, through chapter 6 verse 7
2–4; 6–7	=	chapter 2 through chapter 4, and chapter 6 through chapter 7
2; 4–6:7	=	chapter 2 and chapter 4 through chapter 6 verse 7
2:4, 6–7	=	chapter 2 verse 4 and verse 6 through verse 7 (skip verse 5)
2:4; 6–7	=	chapter 2 verse 4 and chapter 6 through chapter 7

Background to the Divisions

The earliest manuscripts of the biblical books do not necessarily have any division markings on them. Certainly when Paul wrote a letter to a church he did not divide it into chapters or verses; neither did any of the other authors of canonical books. The texts

were written to be read straight through and were neither intended nor expected to need reference notations. The first divisions came about for liturgical purposes; the detailed numbering system came from scholarly debate and discussions.

The earliest divisions made in Hebrew manuscripts were simply writing stylistic devices that were not standardized. These included starting each new sentence on its own line or ending significant sections of narrative by elongating the last letter of the last sentence to fill out the scroll column. Such techniques made it easier to read the text line by line, but were not intended to aid anyone in finding anything except significant stops during reading.

The first division marks made intentionally to standardize the reading of the text (and these appear to be found already in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls) were to mark out readings for the liturgical year. It was the custom to read through the Torah in cycles of either three years (Palestinian and Egyptian lectionary) or one year (Babylonian lectionary) in the course of synagogue services. To this end small marks were made above, below, or between the words that ended and began the weekly readings, in order to assure the congregation of completing the Torah on time.

The Masoretes standardized the marking systems by using a small hanging *pe* [p] to stand for "parashah," the extent of the longer readings, and a small hanging *samek* [s] for "sidrah," the marker for shorter readings. The exact divisions were not standardized until the Masoretes (eighth century C.E.), since the purpose of the divisions was only to insure that the reading of the Torah would be covered in the course of the allotted period, not to ensure that everyone was reading the same sections of the Torah at the same time. Rabbis discussing passages of the Torah by correspondence, which has been common since before the rise of Christianity, would make use of the reading divisions to make clear what passage they were concerned about in the ensuing letter. It might be noted that these weekly readings continue in the modern synagogue where they are called the "sederim"; however, the scrolls actually read in the service are without the division markers, since the reader of the passage of the day is expected to know where to begin and where to end the Torah reading for the particular Sabbath.

Early Christian Bible manuscripts did not divide the texts. However, some Septuagint Jewish lectionary markings were adapted by Christian scribes late in the Roman Period to devise a system of chapter divisions, which were marked by the use of small symbols

in the margins. These divisions were copied into the Vulgate (Latin) translation of the Bible used in Western Europe throughout the Medieval Period. It was discovered that discussions of texts over long distances could be facilitated by making reference to the chapter divisions in the same manner that rabbis could refer to their weekly Torah reading divisions. So in the Medieval Period Christians divided up their Bible manuscripts into sections. At first they used a system of symbols in the margins, then enlarged the first letter of the first word in such a section, and finally illuminated the large letters with brightly colored illustrations.

Various scholars began to number the sections, using their own notions of where the divisions should occur, but the system that became the standard for western Christendom was developed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, before his elevation to the bishopric, while he was teaching at the University of Paris early in the thirteenth century. His system was adopted for use with the official editions of the Vulgate Bible and within a century was in use thoughout Europe as a standard system to refer to passages anywhere in the Bible.

With the spirited (and often mean-spirited) polemics of biblical scholarship between Christian and Jewish scholars in the fourteenth century, it was decided by Rabbi Solomon ben Ishmael, ca. 1330, that the participants needed a common numbering system for their references. To this end he adopted the current Vulgate numbering system by finding the corresponding divisions in the Hebrew Bible (remember that the two Bibles are not exactly the same). The Hebrew numbers vary slightly in their positions in certain places from the Vulgate, often making citations from modern Hebrew texts a verse or two different from the modern Christian citations. When printing was introduced in the Western world, both Jewish and Christian publishers included the divisions developed by Stephen Langton and Solomon ben Ishmael in the printed editions of their Bibles, and thus their division system provided the numbers in use to this day.

When Numbers and Textual Criticism Collide

Since the manuscript traditions for the Bible are not the same everywhere and the numbering system that was accepted in the fourteenth century was based on a particular Vulgate text, the numbers of the Bible do not always fall in the same places when transferred to other Bibles. Moreover, with textual critical reconstructions of the

Greek New Testament often removing lines from the later Gospel narratives, in comparison with earlier Greek manuscripts, these numbers simply fall out of the text. It would produce enormous problems to renumber the ever-changing Greek texts every time something was removed or added to the accepted numbering scheme. The standard manner of dealing with such problems is simply to retain the numbers currently in use and let the text have some odd numbering sequences. A few examples of the problems follow:

Missing Verses: Textual (Matthew 23:14)

Since modern English translations of the Bible are based on critical reconstructions of the original texts, changes in the content of the Hebrew or Greek produce biblical passages different from that used by Langton. If you open your Bible to Matthew 23:14, you may or may not have a verse there. For those New Testaments based on the "Textus Receptus" there will be a "woe" saying of Jesus concerning widows' houses because the line appeared in the Latin text used by Langton to number the verses. However, most ancient manuscripts of Matthew do not have this particular verse, and those manuscripts that scholars consider to be the most reliable for the early tradition of the Gospel overwhelmingly lack it. Therefore, in the reconstruction of the Greek of the New Testament, this passage has been left out as a later addition to the original Gospel. Some modern translations, while leaving the verse out, will place a footnote where it would have appeared and print the line at the bottom of the page, noting that it appears in some Greek manuscripts. Numerous such notes appear throughout modern Bibles, though usually they are only parts of verses; for while it is common for words or phrases to have been added to or subtracted from existing sentences while scribes were copying early texts, it was less common to add or subtract entire sentences.

A Floating Story (John 7:53–8:11)

The most interesting section of numbered material is John 7:53–8:11. This is the story of the woman taken in adultery. The story appeared in Langton's Bible and was numbered in sequence. Through study of both the modern collections of manuscripts and the style of Greek in the passage, however, it is now known that the story is not really a part of the original Gospel of John. The first major clue was that some manuscripts did not contain the passage

at all and others placed it earlier in the Gospel (after 7:36) or at the end as an appendix (after 21:25), while a few manuscripts had the story, but had it as part of the Gospel of Luke (after 21:38). Modern translations of John tend either to retain the narrative at the place where it is numbered by tradition or to drop the entire passage into a lengthy footnote. If the passage is printed in sequence, it may be set apart by brackets or marked with a footnote as to its dubious existence there. Again, those translations from the "Textus Receptus" will have the section but may make no note of the passage's floating nature at all.

The Strange Numbers of the Book of Psalms

The numbering system in the Book of Psalms presents its own problems. Unlike other books of the Bible, the individual psalms were given numbers early in the manuscript traditions. The usual Western number of 150 psalms in the book are not actually numbered the same in all Bibles. The confusion comes because in two cases two distinct psalms in the Hebrew manuscripts were joined together in the Septuagint to form one psalm each (Psalms 9 and 10, and 114 and 115). The total number of 150 for the series of psalms in the book is retained because Psalms 116 and 147 were both divided into two psalms each in the Septuagint. However, this means that the psalms from 9 through 146 are not numbered the same in Bibles dependent on the Septuagint (so the Vulgate and all Catholic Bibles until the twentieth century) as they are in the Hebrew Bible and the Protestant Bible dependent on it. In addition, some of the verse numbering systems shift by one or two verses in the individual psalms, so when looking up a reference from a book it might be necessary to check the verses immediately above or below the verse number as it appears in a particular Bible, as well as checking the psalm one or two poems away from the citation number, should the first passage you check make no sense relative to the book's comments.

Missing Verses: Theological (Job 42:4)

Occasionally one comes across a missing verse number that has nothing to do with the manuscript traditions but is related to scholarly theory or theological positions. The clearest case of this in a current Bible is Job 42:4. In *The New American Bible* the verse is simply missing, and the excluded text is not supplied in the footnote that appears there to explain that the verse is an interruption

in the text. There are no manuscript traditions either in Hebrew or Greek that actually lack the verse; however, a number of modern scholars have noted the similarity of the phrase to one that God uses to open the speech from the storm (38:3b). Believing that Job has to be repenting of his position of innocence before God, some scholars argue that the verse was miscopied from the speech of God and therefore does not belong in the mouth of Job.

Several traditions have come together to produce this textual reconstruction, the first being, of course, that the Western church has traditionally read Job through the theology of the Septuagint, where there is a prologue pitting Good (God) and Evil (the devil) against each other. The Hebrew text has a much more ambiguous vision of the affair. Moreover, Christian reading of the text has always (until the late nineteenth century investigations of the Hebrew text) argued that the disasters befalling Job were solely the work of Satan. The Catholic Church has a long tradition of interpreting biblical texts from the Vulgate, which was the official Catholic Bible until the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The Vulgate, remember, came primarily from the Septuagint, and the Book of Job was understood through the Greek text when translated into Latin. The translators of the *New American Bible* wished to produce an Old Testament text from the Hebrew of the Masoretic Textual tradition, while still maintaining a Catholic Bible tradition of interpretation.

What results is an English translation of Hebrew where the theological thrust of the Greek tradition has taken precedence over the actual Hebrew text. The influence of the Greek in Christian Bibles for the Book of Job is almost universal in the opening chapters where "hasatan" in the Hebrew appears almost always as "Satan" in modern English Christian Bibles (though note that *Tanakh–The Holy Scriptures*, from the Jewish Publication Society, translates "the Adversary" with the Hebrew text). The Hebrew term is an official title meaning something like "the accuser" and is treated in these introductory passages as the divine prosecuting attorney; the Hebrew text does not present the character as anything but a heavenly functionary working for God. The Greek text has "ho diabolos," which means "the slanderer" (from which: the devil). The theological shift made with the Greek translation in the opening of the book led to the position that God is guiltless and Satan did all the evil in the book. Because of this understanding it was necessary for Job to admit he was guilty of accusing God of evil when it was

really Satan who was at fault. The problem is that the Vulgate text reads with the meaning of the Septuagint slant on the story, but the Hebrew text, in fact, has God being the guilty party, and therefore Job would be wrong to repent of accusing God of the evil. The verse 42:4 belongs in the Hebrew text and needs to be translated because Job's last demand that God admit God's guilt is the finish to the Hebrew dialogue section (and it is why the prose ending is as it is). What this does for one's theology, having a biblical text that flatly states that God can be evil, is not our problem here, just that the text can be manipulated to fit the theology of the people who translate it, and one may find a missing verse number for no reason related to any textual manuscript.

Different Verses, Same Numbers? (Ending of Mark)

If several Bibles are consulted for the same chapter and verse of a book, different passages might arise. Though usually that event would occur when Jewish and Christian Bibles are consulted because of the slightly different numbering systems, one can find different passages in books with more than one canonical form. Both Esther and Tobit have two forms that appear in Bibles, and numbers from one tradition will not match the other rendition of the book. Also, Daniel 13:60 may be looked up in Catholic Bibles with the expectation of finding the shout of joy at the end of the trial, but there is no such chapter in Protestant Bibles.

One of the more unusual numbering problems, however, is the ending of Mark. It is now generally agreed among New Testament scholars that Mark ended with 16:8, wherein the women flee in fear from the empty tomb and tell no one what they have seen. However, as scribes copied the manuscript in the early church for use in their own congregations, some added resurrection passages to have the work conform to other gospels or for the benefit of their readers. The Bible that was numbered by Langton had such an addition; the one now called "the longer ending," which adds twelve more verses to the gospel. There is also a "shorter ending" which adds two sentences to 16:8, but which do not have numbers so, when published at the end of the gospel, they form a long 16:8. There is also an ending called "the Freer Logion" (from the manuscript collection where it was first discovered) which has two verses just like the longer ending and then has a three-sentence unique ending of its own; this text is so rare that no modern Bibles assume it was the original ending, but sometimes, when printed, verses 13

and 14 are given the numbers of the longer ending. However, modern Bibles can and do end with Mark 16:8, or with the longer ending, or with the shorter ending. Some modern editions of the Bible will print all three additions to the Gospel of Mark one after the other, and others will choose one of the four options and may or may not explain that there are other endings. So, what one finds when looking up Mark 16:8 or 16:9 can only be determined by the Bible one reads.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Is there any reason to be upset that the chapter and verse numbers do not always match?
2. Although the symbol and number markers were not originally used for grammatical divisions of the text, many people now use them much like periods; why would this be a problem for reading the Bible?
3. Should Bibles provide texts in footnotes of those passages the translators have deemed to be additions to the original text and so removed from their translation?
4. Since the numbering system was created in the Middle Ages and Jewish and Christian systems are different, should new consistent numbers be developed?
5. With several different Bible translations, try picking some chapter and verse numbers at random and finding what each Bible has there (even the different translations would be interesting) and it would help make certain everyone knows how to use the numbering system.

Bibliographical Note

Several works were consulted for the production of this chapter. These include: Martin Noth, *The Old Testament World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966); Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989); Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); and Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962).